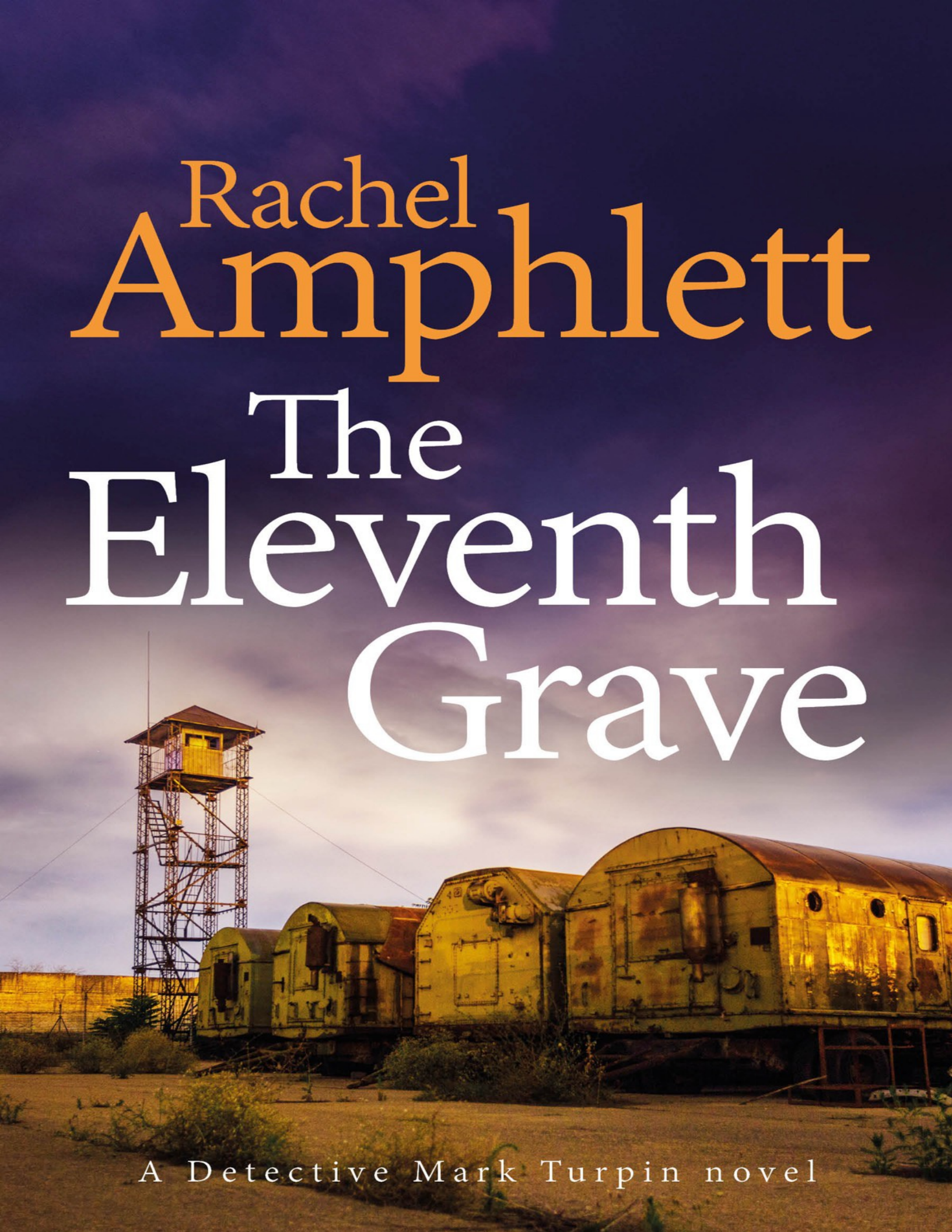
Rachel Amphlett

The Eleventh Grave



A Detective Mark Turpin novel

THE ELEVENTH GRAVE - SAMPLE

A DETECTIVE MARK TURPIN CRIME THRILLER

RACHEL AMPHLETT



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CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Chapter 2

About the Author

CHAPTER ONE

It was a perfect Sunday morning.

A fine mist clung to the banks of the River Thames, hugging the reeds and long grass that swallowed the footpath winding its way out of Sutton Courtenay and on towards Abingdon. It curled into the air as the sun's warmth gradually seeped into the day and created a hazy softness to the landscape that blurred the edges of the horizon.

In the distance, the village church bells rang out across Culham, casting a melody that carried over the undulating landscape. Somewhere, beyond the riverbank, a tractor bumbled back and forth in a field, its engine thrumming amidst the rattle of a seed drill.

A group of four ducks paddled downstream, followed at a distance by a pair of swans that dipped graceful necks into the water, their pace languid while they kept a watchful eye on their surroundings.

Then there was a split-second flash of turquoise and orange to the left-hand side of the river before a soft *plop* preceded a series of ripples as a kingfisher darted beneath the surface. It reappeared moments later, exploding from the water with a small fish in its beak before disappearing into a small hole burrowed into the muddy bank.

A magpie chuckled its approval from the upper boughs of a blossoming tree, and then launched itself across the river, the emerging sunshine catching the purple-blue hue of its wings.

Helen Maddison rested her paddle on her lap and tilted her chin upwards with a faint smile on her lips, letting the sunlight warm her face while the kayak coasted under the propulsion of her last stroke.

Jason, her husband of eight years, kept a steady pace in front of her. The dip and splash of his paddle broke the water at even intervals, and she could hear him humming under his breath.

And then he laughed.

'If you keep doing that, you're going to be moaning you can't keep up with me again.'

She opened her eyes to see him looking over his shoulder at her, and grinned. 'I can't help it. It's the first time this year it's been warm enough to do this without having to wear loads of layers.'

'You'll be complaining about having to top up your sunscreen next.'

'Very funny. The Easter weekend is meant to be rubbish, even if it is late this year.'

He paused and rolled the paddle shaft from his wrist to his elbows before lobbing it into the air and catching it. A contented sigh escaped his lips as he caught it. 'This is perfect. I was worried there'd be more people out this morning.'

'Me too.' She dug her paddle into the water and brought her kayak alongside his as the river widened. 'There was only one other car in the car park though, and it looked like it had fishing

stuff in it.'

'Depends what else is on this morning, I suppose.'

'There's a craft market in Abingdon today, isn't there?'

He wrinkled his nose. 'That means the pub'll be busy. I knew I should've booked a table for lunch.'

'We can always sit outside if it's too crowded inside.' She squinted against the light. 'It's meant to be like this all day.'

She turned at the sound of a dog bark to see a couple with a Golden Retriever walking along the footpath towards them, the animal bounding left and right as it sought out sounds and smells. A squirrel flashed up a towering oak tree, the mammal's outline silhouetted amongst the fledgling leaves, and the dog's eyes followed it with interest as it passed underneath.

'Morning,' Helen called.

The man held up a hand in reply, his other around his partner's waist while she smiled at the passing kayakers. The dog paused to watch them with curiosity before the man called to him and it went tearing off after the couple.

'I thought he was going to jump in then,' said Jason.

'I was wondering that.' Helen grinned. 'I don't think they would've thanked us – did you see the mud up his paws already?'

After a few more paddle strokes they were passing gaps in the hedgerows where thin beech and alder saplings had been planted the previous spring. Beyond these, Helen could see freshly tilled arable soil with its grey texture common to the South Oxfordshire landscape, while the sound of gulls now accompanied the tractor in the distance.

Rooks circled overhead, keeping a wary eye on the world below, their caws accompanying lazy spirals as they drifted up and down on the air.

'There's that fisherman.'

Jason's voice turned her attention back to the river ahead, and she squinted. 'Where?'

'He's crouched next to the water, just before the bridge – see him? Must've lost a line or something. You'd better go in front of me and keep close to this bank, otherwise he might moan that we're scaring the fish away.'

'Right-o.' She watched as the man rose to his feet and eyed their approach before turning his back.

As they drew alongside, she noticed he wore a thick navy sweatshirt over muddied jeans. He kept his back turned, his head lowered, and she realised he was looking at his phone.

'Morning,' she said.

He glanced up, his features rugged as if he spent a lot of his time outside, then looked away without replying and moved towards the bridge.

Jason caught her bemused eye-roll and grinned before they passed beneath the bridge. 'Friendly.'

'Shhh,' she said, smiling, her voice echoing off the wood and metal structure. She shivered as the shadows claimed her, then breathed a sigh of relief when they emerged the other side, sunlight bathing her shoulders once more. 'So… what do you think? Paddle up to the weir at Abingdon, then turn back and find a spot for lunch?'

'Yeah, I reckon that's our best bet. What time do we have to pick up the kids from your mum's?'

'Seven thirty. She said she'll feed them before we get there. I suppose if we—'

A strangled cry pierced the air, followed by a splash from behind.

Heart racing, Helen twisted in the cockpit of the kayak to see small waves breaking the surface of the water below the bridge.

Jason stabbed his paddle in the river, spinning around to face the other way. ‘What the…?’

Then a hand broke the surface, fingers clawing desperately before a man’s head appeared.

‘It’s that fisherman,’ Helen said. She started paddling back towards him. ‘He’ll never be able to swim to the bank in this current.’

The man’s eyes widened in panic as the cold water started to drag him down, his mouth opening in an “o” of shock while his arms thrashed.

Then he was under the water again, leaving behind concentric ripples that spread out until they lapped at the roots of bullrushes and long grass on either side of the waterway.

Helen gritted her teeth, dug the paddle blade in faster, and slewed the kayak around as she drew level with the man’s last position.

Tightening the sash of her life vest, she leaned out with the paddle as the drowning man resurfaced. ‘Grab this!’

He gasped, swallowed a mouthful of water, and then spat it out, eyes widening in realisation. He thrashed his arms in an attempt to swim closer, burdened by his clothing and weakening by the second in the frigid river.

She swore under her breath as her kayak began to drift away from him in the current, unwilling to take her gaze away and lose sight of him.

Then there was a soft *thud* on the opposite side of her kayak, and she glanced over her shoulder to see that Jason was using his paddle to push her gently towards the man, his jaw set in concentration.

Turning back, she leaned out farther.

‘Come on,’ she urged. ‘Just grab hold of the paddle and we’ll tow you back to the bank.’

The man tried again, but his hand slipped down the aluminium shaft. He cried out, spluttered as he took in more water, and then started to slide beneath the river’s surface once more.

‘No…’ Helen ignored the hard edge of the kayak’s cockpit sticking into her hip and stretched the paddle out as far as she could. ‘Try again. You can do it.’

The man attempted a feeble breast stroke, then cried out in frustration as his sweatshirt billowed around his shoulders, thwarting his efforts.

Helen glanced at her clothing, then the water. ‘I’m going in. It’ll be easier for me to swim ashore with him.’

‘No – the water’s too cold and he could pull you under with him,’ said Jason. He nudged the kayaks closer, and the man snatched at air before his fingers found Helen’s outstretched paddle.

This time, he didn’t let go.

‘Got him,’ she gasped and started dragging him towards her kayak, her shoulders and arm muscles protesting against his weight.

‘Hold onto the bow,’ she called out, keeping her voice calm. ‘Hang on, and we’ll paddle back to the bank with you.’

The man gave a weak nod, his sodden hair clinging to his forehead trailing traces of weed that lent a green sheen to his pale skin.

When she got him alongside, he reached out with one hand to touch the pointed prow of the kayak, then with one final spurt of energy he wrapped his arms around the bow.

She pulled in the paddle and started to turn her kayak.

‘Hang on, mate,’ said Jason, waiting while she twisted in her seat and grabbed onto the sides of his kayak. ‘Helen will keep an eye on you while I paddle us to the bank. It’s not far, but it’s

deep here. We've got dry clothes for you, and we'll get onto emergency services.'

Helen could hear the man's breath coming in shallow gasps, a wracking cough seizing him as his lungs ejected the water he'd inhaled. He groaned, a deep agonising sound that sent a shiver across her shoulders despite the warm light that now bathed the stretch of water as the sun reached its zenith.

Turning away from him for a moment, she saw that Jason had almost managed to get them to the bank.

Just another two metres and they could get the man out of his wet clothes and phone for an ambulance…

The hull of her kayak bumped against mud and a soft judder passed through the vessel as they reached land.

'Here, hold them steady while I help him out.' Jason didn't wait for an answer, and tossed both of their paddles onto the bank before hurrying to where the man was trying to crawl out of the water.

He placed his hands under the man's armpits and staggered backwards, dragging him away from the swirling depths and through the long grass and rushes to the path.

Helen watched while Jason lay him on his side, crouching beside him while keeping his voice calm, reassuring him before he started pulling the man's sodden clothing off. Rubbing at the man's limbs to get the circulation going, he peered over his shoulder at her. 'There are dry clothes in my bag. I reckon they'll fit him.'

Rolling over, she stumbled over to the kayaks and dragged them to the far side of the path. She popped open the front hatch on Jason's and pulled out his dry bag. Rummaging through the contents, her fingers found the thick fleece he had packed in case the weather turned foul and a pair of shorts left over from the summer that had somehow never made it to the washing machine.

She tossed them over to him, then turned her attention to her own kayak and pulled her mobile phone from her dry bag.

Once she was certain the emergency responders had the correct GPS location for them, she ended the call and pulled off her own fleece.

'Here, we'll use this over your legs,' she said to the man. She wrapped the top across his legs, tucking it in. 'I'm Helen, by the way. And this is my husband, Jason.'

The man opened his mouth to speak, his teeth chattering. 'B-B-Barry.'

'Nice to meet you,' Jason said. 'Shame about the circumstances though.'

That raised a small smile. 'No kidding.'

'Where's all your fishing gear?' said Helen. 'Do you want us to fetch it for you?'

The smile changed to confusion. 'What?'

'I thought I saw you fishing. Before we went under the bridge.'

Barry shook his head. 'No. No fishing gear.'

'Oh. Okay.' She noticed his hands were still icy cold and started massaging the skin while Jason did the same to the man's feet and ankles. 'Is there anyone we can call for you? To let them know what's happened?'

'No. Don't worry.' His body trembled, and he emitted a loud sigh. 'Thank you.'

'Don't go to sleep,' Jason commanded, his voice a notch louder. 'The ambulance will be here soon.'

'With lots of warm blankets,' added Helen. She peered over her shoulder at voices to see the dog walkers returning, their faces full of concern.

‘We saw a commotion up here,’ said the woman when they drew closer. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘It is now. Thank you.’

‘Can we call an ambulance for you?’

‘Already done, but if you’ve got some spare clothing we could use to keep him warm, that’d be good.’

The couple called their dog to heel, clipped on his lead and promptly shrugged off coats and sweatshirts, passing them over to Jason, who draped them over the man.

‘I’ll wait on the bridge to spot the ambulance,’ said the woman. ‘They’ll probably use the track leading to the hydro place to get here.’

‘Thanks.’

Helen could hear the sirens in the distance now, and sent a silent prayer of thanks for an ambulance being in the vicinity.

Five minutes later, two paramedics were hurrying across the bridge towards them, and then she and Jason were gently pushed aside while Barry became their central focus.

She watched as they kept up a steady stream of conversation with Barry, constantly reassuring him while checking his vital signs and manoeuvring him onto the stretcher. Blankets were wrapped around him, swaddling him into warmth, and then they were ready.

‘Let me have your details,’ said the younger paramedic, taking out his phone. ‘Just in case the police want to talk to you.’

‘The police?’ Helen’s heart lurched. ‘Why would the police want to talk to us?’

He shrugged. ‘It’s only a formality, in case there’s an enquiry about how he fell off the bridge.’

‘Insurance companies,’ Jason said, the scorn in his voice tangible. ‘Always the case, right?’

The paramedic gave a polite smile. ‘Phone numbers will be enough.’

That done, the emergency responders began packing away their kit and preparing to leave with their patient, praising the Maddisons for their quick thinking.

Helen blushed under the scrutiny of the dog walkers as Barry reached out to shake her hand, his grip weak.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘Good job these two knew what to do to get you out of the water.’ The older paramedic smiled and patted him on the shoulder before taking his share of the stretcher weight. ‘You’re a lucky one, mate.’

Barry coughed, then shuddered, his voice a mere rasp. ‘This time.’

CHAPTER TWO

Two days later

There was a palpable frost to the air in the incident room by eleven o'clock that morning.

Despite the bright early April sunshine splintering the window blinds and casting zigzags across the threadbare carpet, the air conditioning had broken over the weekend. The vents in the ceiling were now discharging an icy breath across the necks of a dozen or so officers who huddled at their desks, some still wearing their outer garments over their uniforms or shirts.

Two whiteboards took up the far right-hand wall, one bare – for now – and the other criss-crossed with different-coloured text that was being erased with an old tea towel by a junior constable. A steady squeak accompanied her work while the smell of an alcohol-based solution wafted across the frigid air, mixing with the tangible odour of stale coffee beans.

A steady hum of conversation filled the room, desk phones shrilled across the open plan space, and the whirr and spit of two large printers against the far wall carried over to where a group of detectives of varying rank congregated around a man in his mid-thirties, their faces a mixture of concern and bemusement.

Detective Sergeant Mark Turpin sat with his right hand cradling a steaming mug of coffee while his left held an ice pack to a bruised eye socket that was an angry shade of red.

He cursed under his breath, the welt obscuring his vision on one side.

'I told you I thought she might take a swing at you.' Detective Constable January West looked at him over her computer screen, her green eyes narrowing. 'And you said—'

'—that she wouldn't be so stupid. I know.'

She sighed, adjusted the ponytail holding her light brown hair back from her face and huffed her fringe from her forehead. 'Well maybe you'll listen to me next time, Sarge. Might save me doing all this paperwork for a start.'

Mark aimed a mock snarl her way, then looked at DC Caroline Roberts. 'Any news from the court?'

'The woman has been taken into custody, and her husband's been returned to HMP Bullingdon.' The DC cocked an eyebrow. 'And that looks painful, Sarge. Maybe we need to get you some martial arts training or something.'

'Very funny.'

'I'm serious,' she said. 'At least you'd learn how to duck.'

'Get out.'

She grinned and held up a small white plastic bubble pack. 'I found some painkillers in

Alex's desk. Want them?'

'Please.' He popped two into his mouth and swigged the coffee as Alex McClellan wandered over. The younger DC's eyes were wide.

'Woah. I heard the missus was arrested,' he said. 'What did you do?'

'Nothing,' Mark protested, pushing the empty coffee mug away. 'She walked past with her husband's lawyer, calm as anything. Next thing I knew, she'd lashed out. I didn't have time to react.'

'Did she say anything?'

'It's not repeatable.'

'Martial arts,' said Caroline, wagging her forefinger at him.

'Like I have time. Besides, it's not as if I could—'

'I need you two to head over to the morgue in Oxford.'

Mark turned at the sound of the voice to see Detective Inspector Ewan Kennedy advancing towards them, a flimsy manila file in his hand and his face one of determination. 'What's up, guv?'

'I just got off the phone with Gillian Appleworth.'

West frowned. 'We're not expecting any post mortem results this week, are we?'

The DI sidled past Alex and leaned against the younger detective's desk before opening the file. 'We aren't, but she's done one this morning that's causing her some consternation, and she's asked us to make some enquiries. I've assigned it a new reference number in HOLMES2 and I want you two to lead the investigation.'

Mark raised his eyebrows, then winced as a fresh jolt of pain tore across his face. Blinking to offset the effect, he tried to refocus. 'What're the circumstances?'

'A bloke by the name of Barry Windlesham fell into the Thames at Culham on Sunday morning. He was pulled out by a couple of kayakers and ambulance'd to the John Radcliffe. Everyone was saying how lucky he was given the water temperature's still bloody cold, but he died a few hours later.'

'What from?' said West, pulling her notebook closer and turning to a fresh page.

'Delayed drowning,' said Kennedy. 'Gillian says she found traces of water-induced inflammation to his lungs when she opened him up this morning. According to the hospital records, he developed breathing difficulties at around two in the morning yesterday, and deteriorated pretty quickly after that.'

Mark put the makeshift icepack beside his keyboard and pocketed the remaining painkillers. 'How did he fall in?'

'That's unknown. The kayakers told the ambulance crew that they only heard him cry out when he hit the water before they turned around and rescued him.'

'What did he tell the hospital staff?'

Kennedy's mouth downturned. 'Nothing at all.'

'What do you mean?'

'According to them, he refused to talk about the incident at all, other than to say he fell off the bridge.'

West frowned. 'I know the bridge – Scott and I have often walked along that stretch of the river with the boys. It's got guardrails so it'd take some doing to fall in.'

The DI leaned forward and tapped the file against her arm. 'So why are you both still sitting there?'

'On our way.' Mark took the file and pushed back his chair, shoved his mobile phone into his

pocket and waited while West swung her bag over her shoulder. ‘You okay to drive? I’ll make some phone calls and see if there are some contact details for the kayakers on the way.’

He saw her cast a sideways glance at Alex before she swept a set of keys from the younger detective’s desk.

‘No problem,’ she said.

‘Give me a call once you’ve spoken with her and the kayakers,’ said Kennedy. ‘We’ll make a decision then whether to open a new case for this one, or whether it can be passed over to the coroner’s office for a ruling.’

‘Understood, guv.’ Mark hurried after West, then held open the incident room door for her.

‘First a punch-up, then the morgue,’ she said as they headed for the stairs. ‘You’re on a roll today, Sarge.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Amphlett is a USA Today bestselling author of crime fiction and spy thrillers, many of which have been translated worldwide.

Her novels are available in eBook, print, and audiobook formats from libraries and retailers as well as her website shop.

A keen traveller, Rachel has both Australian and British citizenship.

Find out more about Rachel's books at: www.rachelamphlett.com.